



H. Joseph Ehrmann, owner of San Francisco's Elixir, samples from a flight at the bar. Ehrmann partners with the Scotch Malt Whisky Society to hold tastings at Elixir.

# CLUBS ON THE TOWN

*To maximize your whisky club's knowledge and outreach, look to your local watering hole*

**BY SALLY KRAL**

The benefits of hosting your whisky club in a public space instead of your home are vast—and for the right establishment, it's a win-win situation for all involved. Whether you're just starting out and looking for a neutral meeting ground, or want to expand your club's reach, a whisky-focused bar is a prime spot to get together.

Finding an appropriate meeting space was an early hurdle Los Angeles resident Andy Smith and his neighbor Scott Saikley faced when they decided to start a whisky club in 2006. The first was simply forming the group. "This was before Facebook was really big—it wasn't as easy to connect with people online," Smith says. "We started a website with a sign-up form and for months waited to see if anyone would show interest." It took some time, but people did sign up—about 15 to 20,

in fact—but still, where were they all going to meet? "Everyone was pretty queasy about meeting at their home until they felt sure that the club had no ax murderers," Smith recalls with a laugh. But since this was a group of whisky enthusiasts, he felt safe to assume they would be comfortable in a bar.

And so, the cold calling began. Smith reached out to upward of 20 different local bars before his efforts fell on the sympathetic ear of a manager at Casey's Irish Pub in downtown Los Angeles. The manager offered up the bar's private meeting room on the slowest night of the week, even allowing the group—LA Scotch Club—to bring in their own bottles as long as they purchased food. "It was a great place for a first meeting, which was me and Scott, my wife, and three others who had signed up on our website,"

Smith says. "It was a fun little crew."

Although the LA Scotch Club quickly outgrew the space at Casey's—it's now the largest scotch-focused club in the country according to Smith, with chapters in San Diego, Orange County, San Francisco, Denver, and Atlanta—that first meeting was instrumental in getting the club up and running. With so many whisky bars and other spirits-focused venues out there today, the opportunities to broaden your club's scope and make new connections are tremendous—there's practically no excuse to stay cooped up at home.

## **Be Prepared**

Smith's request to bring his own bottles into a bar is admittedly a tall order. "Most places would say, 'If you're not going to buy and drink our whisky, why are you here?'" And I



Top: Darron Foy, head bartender at New York's The Flat-iron Room, leads a whisky tasting. Bottom: Birch Road Cellar, with locations in Chicago and Seattle, is a paid-membership club that offers meeting spaces for tastings, themed events, and bottle lockers to its members.

TOP: DEAN PRIME

completely understood that.” In these cases, Smith aims to agree upon a set food menu or minimum ahead of time. “We also always choose the slowest night of the week, and with a prix fixe menu I can tell them exactly how much money they’re guaranteed to get from us—since it’s their slowest night, they might not have made that money otherwise.”

Even so, there are certain state and local laws that simply don’t allow for outside alcohol to be brought in and served—and it can be a liability. “You don’t want to imperil your liquor license, plus if you have people free-pouring and someone is overserved, that’s on the bar,” notes Pedro Shanahan, spirits guide at Seven Grand in Los Angeles. So what Seven Grand offers whisky enthusiasts is a menu of over 700 whiskies from around the world, and an eighteen-seat tasting room called Bar Jackalope, which can be reserved for a nominal fee depending on the type of event. Many different whisky clubs hold periodic meetings in Bar Jackalope, including Women Who Whiskey, the Scotch Malt Whisky Society, and

For the San Diego chapter of LA Scotch Club, the local liquor store chain Keg N Bottle has been the club’s main tasting space. “It has a good meeting area with seating and they’ve been very supportive of us,” Smith says. “We usually do rep events there—either with someone the store finds or we bring in—and the store sometimes gives us discounts on the bottles we try that night, so it’s a win-win.”

The Boston-area North Shore Whisky Club has formed relationships with all types of venues to host its meetings, including restaurants and pubs, golf clubs, fish and game clubs, historic lodges, university alumni function rooms, and retail shops. “All of them offer us private space for our gatherings and some provide food,” says Darren McInnis, who founded the club with his friend George Chagnon. At most meetings, the whisky is provided by the representatives of the distillery, distributor, or importer that’s leading the tasting. For multipurpose halls, there’s usually a rental fee for the space, but usually not for retail shops or bars and restaurants,

## Broaden Your Resources

So, for a new whisky club just starting out with members who may not know one another yet, there’s a clear benefit to holding tastings in a public space. Furthermore, hosting at home is a lot of work. “There’s cleaning the house prior to having guests and then the clean-up after,” Provins points out. “Maybe there are kids or dogs or roommates that complicate things, plus not everyone has the glassware or seating for a group of more than six people. Hosting outside the home takes all that hassle out of the equation—just pick a date and meet at the spot.”

Provins adds that Birch Road Cellar also invites industry experts to host events for members, and these connections prove a valuable resource for tasting clubs in particular. Examples of past events hosted at Birch Road Cellar include a Q&A night with John Campbell of Laphroaig and ‘Dinner with a Distiller’ with Miles Munroe of Westward Whiskey.

Bars and similar venues tend to have many connections within the industry and most are happy to spread the wealth. “The whisky manager at a local spirits store connected us to the founder of the New Zealand Whisky Collection,” North Shore Whisky Club’s McInnis says. “He ended up conducting one of his first U.S. tastings with our group.” Old Line Scotch Club’s Mowery adds that sometimes a bar can help your club track down a rare whisky you wouldn’t find otherwise.

Indeed, many whisky-focused bars today have truly exceptional spirits lists that would be a boon to any gathering of whisky enthusiasts. “We house over 1,200 whiskies from around the world that allow whisky clubs to sample a jaw-dropping selection,” says Darron Foy, head bartender at The Flatiron Room in New York City. “It also benefits the staff members, who can chat with other aficionados. This constant and continually changing conversation helps both sides to further their knowledge, understanding, and unfettered love of whisky.” The Flatiron Room also touts numerous whisky flights, a Whiskey School that offers various educational classes on the spirit, and private whisky tastings led by an in-house expert.

At the San Francisco whisky bar Elixir, proprietor H. Joseph Ehrmann is happy to provide special discounts to whisky clubs for the bar’s ticketed events. “We have a unique partnership with the Scotch Malt Whisky Society as their San Francisco partner bar, hosting their monthly tastings, which has brought us new customers and them new members,” he notes.

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Single Cask Nation. Seven Grand also runs its own Whisky Society, for which it invites a different brand ambassador or master distiller every Monday night to lead public tastings that cost \$15 to attend.

Since policies and regulations can vary, it’s important to have all expectations discussed and settled upon before you bring your club into a bar. “Finding a restaurant or bar that will order bottles for you or allow you to bring in bottles can be difficult,” notes Joe Mowery, president of the Old Line Scotch Club, which he says is the largest and longest running whisky club in Maryland. To sidestep that obstacle, his club meets at a restaurant with an attached liquor store in Laurel, Maryland called Tubby’s Grill. “We buy bottles from the venue’s store, pay a corkage fee for each bottle we pour in the restaurant, and then bring in 30 people who are all purchasing food and drinks. It’s mutually beneficial for both sides.” The club charges each attendee \$20, which covers the cost of three to five bottles per meeting, plus corkage fees and tips—it’s a small enough cost that Mowery says members attend consistently each month.

though a minimum spend on food is sometimes required for the latter.

For clubs that wish for maximum free rein, establishments like Birch Road Cellar, a BYOB members-only club with locations in Chicago and Seattle, may be a great option. Membership to Birch Road Cellar is \$105 a month and includes fingerprint access to the club every day from 8 a.m. to 2 a.m., a private locker in a climate-controlled cellar, plus access to a dining room, lounge, and tasting room equipped with glassware, mixers, ice, decanters, and bar tools. Members are left on their own—there are no bartenders or servers—plus there’s no annual contract commitment or additional fees.

“Not only is Birch Road Cellar a great space for whisky clubs to meet for their tastings, but there’s also been a number of groups that have formed at the club over the years—there’s currently about a dozen that meet monthly,” says Sharon Provins, who co-founded the business with Kim Bosse. “Kim and I are passionate about real-life connections and bringing back the idea that drinks are meant to be shared over good conversation.”

“Many of our customers who never knew of the society are now getting involved, buying their own bottles for home and enjoying the selections we keep stocked. It’s a great partnership, and we offer these members discounts on every neat pour of spirits.”

North Shore Whisky Club’s McInnis appreciates the varied connections he’s been able to make through his club over the years. “We’ve created relationships with brand ambassadors, master distillers, importers, distributors, retail shop owners, and whisky specialists from around the world,” he says, adding that the venues where the club holds tastings are also happy to assist with getting the word out about their group. “They allow us to advertise our events and potentially extend our outreach.” This has also been the case for LA Scotch Club, according to Smith. “If you work it right, you can leave some cards or flyers there. I used to do that a lot in the early days and we definitely got some new faces at our events that way.”

### Cultivate a Community

At the center of any whisky club is a tight-knit bond between individuals joined together by a common interest. And by broadening their meeting spaces to include venues outside of their homes, clubs have the opportunity to expand that community even further.

“Besides the obvious service advantages of meeting in a bar or liquor store, it’s really great getting to know new people who are in and around this industry,” North Shore Whisky Club’s Chagnon says, adding that one such member of the industry—someone who worked at one of the liquor stores they frequent—invited some members of the group to his home for a bottle-share event that blew everyone away. “That evening I tasted something that was laid down the year I was born: a 1968 single barrel Bunnahabhain. It goes without saying that I will never forget the generosity our host exhibited that night.”

The first step to making connections like this is getting out there and getting to know the folks at your local bar, restaurant, retail shop, or other similar venue. “Come to the bar! We’re firm believers that a bar is a



Above: a tasting at Los Angeles’s Seven Grand. The venue’s Bar Jackalope is available for tastings. Left: Seven Grand spirits guide Pedro Shanahan.

community center, and you don’t get the benefits if you’re not there to participate,” Elixir’s Ehrmann says. Seven Grand’s Shanahan echoes this sentiment, noting that he encourages whisky clubs to become more intimate with their local bartenders. “Just be good guests, because if you spark that personal connection, those bartenders will take really good care of you.”

Beyond the connections that stand to be made within the industry, meeting in a public space also increases your chances of gaining

new members who can become new friends. “There’s a bourbon group that’s been meeting in our Lincoln Park space in Chicago for two years now that formed as strangers with a common interest and now they’ve become close friends,” Birch Road Cellar’s Provins says.

Though Mowery notes that most people are initially drawn to Old Line Scotch Club to try new and interesting whiskies, the community and camaraderie is why people stick around. “Many of us have become lifelong friends; we attend all sorts of whisky events together, trade samples, and just hang out together—that’s really what it’s all about: the people. The whisky is a bonus.” ■